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Wednesday, June 25, 2008

County to weigh whether its alert system is effective

Other emergency options not used need to be examined, says Knapp

by Janel Davis | Staff Writer

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First came the flood, now comes the fire.

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County emergency officials are preparing for questions on Thursday from a County Council committee on breakdowns with the county's electronic alert system and why other mass messaging options were not used during last week's water main break, which affected thousands of residents and businesses for three days.

Homeland security chief Gordon A. Aoyagi said last week that a message about the break was not sent to the 13,000 people who subscribed to the system because the two employees who operate the system were out of town. A third employee did not know how to send the alerts. A fourth employee with knowledge of the system was eventually found and sent out alerts later.

Aoyagi admitted that his department "blew it badly."

Still, the fact that other emergency alert options are available to the county and were not used is "unacceptable," said Council President Michael J. Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown.

"We have resources for adequate communication now," he said, describing the county's multiple Web sites, its television station and a reverse 911 targeted calling system. "We have the tools, they functioned, but we just didn't bring them to the game."

County officials provided a timeline of communications used in the early morning hours of the June 15 break, saying they adequately informed residents. Included on the list were several notices sent to the media, internal messages to county employees and to the school system about school closures and boil-water alerts.

Emergency notices were also posted on county Web sites, said county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield. The county decided not to scroll messages on its cable television station because software does not allow operators to remove messages from rebroadcasts, and the school system — not county government — has a reverse 911 calling system.

"We are examining our communication methods with the purpose of keeping what works and fixing what doesn't," Lacefield said.

That may mean re-examining the county's use of the alert system, which may not be efficient, said Stephen E. Hannestad a research fellow at the Center for Information Policy and Electronic Government at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"The text messaging system or e-mail alerts that we have started with in the emergency response system was a quick way to relay information to first responders not necessarily residents," Hannestad said. "... So ultimately, the only sure way to get information well distributed is the way that we had to do it in the 1970s and 1980s, and that's sending personnel into the affected areas. In this case, health inspectors going to individual restaurants, and in other instances, fire trucks going to neighborhoods blaring their sirens."

Effective communication is a problem being examined at all levels of government and in jurisdictions worldwide, said

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Hannestad.

“You want to get the message out to the maximum number of people, but at the same time you don’t want it to go out so often that the child who calls wolf loses its impact,” he said.

The council’s Public Safety Committee meeting is scheduled for Thursday. Another briefing before the full council is set for next month, possibly on July 8.

